

Youth Survey Provides Wealth of Data on Behavior to Inform Intervention Strategies

Fear of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections is strongest motivator to remain abstinent.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Tanzania is hitting youth hard. About seven of every 10 new HIV infections among females occur among those aged 15 to 24. High pregnancy rates among youth are also a major concern. To help understand how to address these risks, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)/Tanzania funded YouthNet to conduct a survey that would provide information to guide programmatic initiatives.

The Youth Behavior Survey was conducted in 2004 in the Iringa region in the southern part of the country. It was a population-based, cross-sectional survey of youth between the ages of 13 and 24. YouthNet/Tanzania and local partners interviewed 4,693 youth at households in all Iringa districts. This region of 1.5 million contains some urban but mostly rural districts. The survey included married and unmarried girls and boys.

The survey results provide a comprehensive picture of Iringa youth's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors regarding HIV and reproductive health. The 78-page report of the survey results includes 13 recommendations addressing protective strategies, gender norms, the knowledge-behavior gap, and services. The report contains 36 tables of data and 27 figures showing trends. Labeled Youth Research Working Paper No.1, it is available at: <http://www.fhi.org/en/Youth/YouthNet/Publications/YouthResearchWorkingPapers.htm>

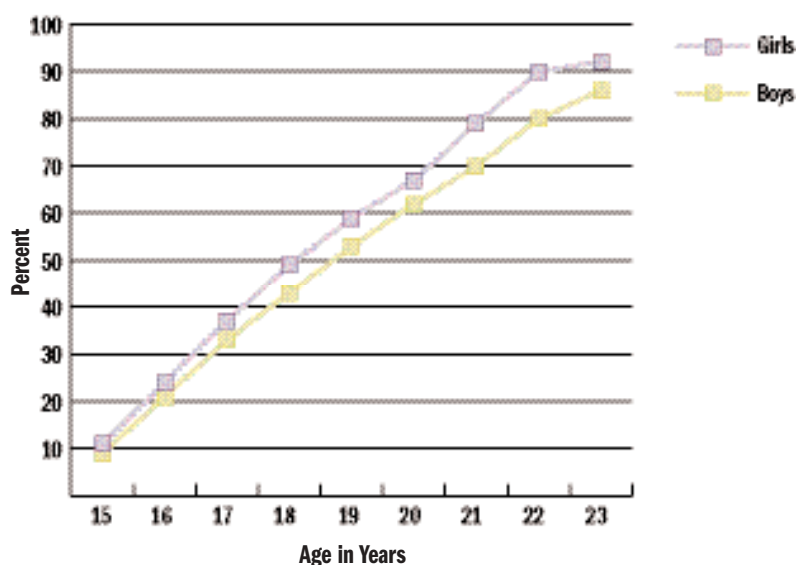
Results

The results section of the full survey report discusses findings in five parts: knowledge; attitudes and social norms; sexual behavior (sexual debut, current sexual relationships, and consequences of sex); use of services; and reaching youth with information. This brief discusses only the data relating to

the age of sexual initiation and messages about abstinence. A central goal of many youth programs in Tanzania is to increase the proportion of youth who practice primary abstinence. The survey offers insights about why youth say they are abstinent.

The figure below shows the percentage of girls and boys ages 15 to 23 who reported ever having had sex. The median reported age of first sexual experience was 18 for girls and 19 for boys. This is substantially higher than survey respondents perceived that sexual debut occurs among their peers. In the survey, youth perceived the median age of sexual debut for

Percentage of Youth Ages 15 to 24 Who Had Sex by Various Ages*

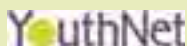


* Figure excludes estimate for those 24 years old since too few cases were available for analysis.

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Research Results

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girls in the Iringa region to be around 15, and for boys to be between 15 and 17. The high ages reported for actual sexual debut suggest some strong motivation to remain abstinent.

Across all subgroups (boys/girls, rural/urban, younger/older), about half of those who reported they had not had sex said they remained abstinent because of a fear of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS. About one in four youth abstained for religious or moral reasons, the second most cited reason overall. For girls, however, the second most cited reason was fear of pregnancy, mentioned by more than one-third of females. About one in five youth who reported they abstain cited reasons related to improving their lives, such as completing schooling, having a career, and having control over their lives.

Of those who reported abstaining from sex, about two-thirds said they felt pressure to abstain from sex, and this percentage was higher for youth in urban areas and among females. Youth indicated that the pressure comes from multiple sources, with parents reported most often (71 percent). More than a fourth of those who felt pressure said it came from relatives, friends, and religious authorities.

A substantial proportion (39 percent) of those who have not had sex intended to wait until they got married, and a similarly large percentage intended to wait until they got older. A third sizable group (18 percent) intended to wait until they have completed school and fulfilled their plans. Despite these responses, only a small percentage of those who have had sex actually gave marriage as the reason for first-time sex.

Given the discrepancy between stated goals for delaying sex and actual sexual debut, youth need to know ways other than abstinence with which they can protect themselves. While about three-fourths of youth reported abstinence as a way to avoid getting HIV, only one-third mentioned being faithful as a protection strategy. Just over one-half mentioned condoms as a means of protecting against HIV.

Conclusions and Implications

The relatively high median age of sexual debut reported in this survey indicates that many young women and men are remaining abstinent until their late teens. The level of reported sexual activity at young ages was very low, and less than a fourth of youth reported having had sexual relations by the age of 16. This later age of sexual debut may be over-reported since some youth may have been reluctant to admit to having had sexual relations. Nonetheless, youth seem to recognize the value of remaining abstinent. This is based on a fear of contracting HIV/AIDS, or to a lesser extent, of becoming pregnant.

Despite the high level of abstinence among youth, programs should not be complacent about the need to continue promoting messages about abstaining and about other protection strategies. First, messages need to be reinforced continuously, especially among younger youth. Second, youth need support to handle conflicting pressures about whether to abstain or to have sex. Lastly, at some point abstinence will end, either through marriage or sooner, and youth need options to protect themselves when they begin sexual relations.

The primary motivations for abstinence now are avoiding disease, and to a lesser extent, preventing pregnancy. Promoting the positive value of abstinence (e.g., ability to finish school, begin a career, etc.), along with the existing messages, might help youth better understand why abstinence is a healthy option. Expanding the rationale and incentive for abstinence to prevention of both STIs/HIV and unintended pregnancy might also expand the appeal of this option.

— Karen Katz

Karen Katz, a deputy director at Family Health International, contributed to the Iringa survey report.

YouthNet Briefs is an activity of YouthNet, a five-year program funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development to improve reproductive health and prevent HIV among young people. The YouthNet team is led by Family Health International and includes CARE USA and RTI International.